

STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT

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**ZOUERATE 1978: SUPPORTING AIR OPERATIONS,
AN ARMY TEAM AMIDST FRANCE'S AFRICAN STRATEGY**

BY

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French Army

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ABSTRACT

In 1975, Morocco and Mauritania shared between them the territory of the former Spanish Western Sahara. A liberation movement supported by Algeria, the Polisario Front, opposed this situation and launched devastating raids, mainly into Mauritania. To help this country, in 1977-1978, France carried out operation "Lamantin". It consisted of surveillance and attack aircraft stationed in Senegal, and small Army teams deployed in Mauritanian garrisons.

Zouerate, a small Northern town where a very important iron-ore mine produced 1/6 of the country's GNP, had been the target of two attacks before the French team came. The missions of these eight paratroopers -- quite similar to some of the US Special Forces -- were to comfort the European technicians, assess the situation, advise the Mauritians, prepare the air strikes, and secure a possible downed aircraft.

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PREPARATION AND DECISION

Of course P. was a leader; thus he did not understand the reasons for his colonel to withdraw him from A Company, where he had arrived five years ago as a 2nd lieutenant, and assign him as the assistant training officer, dealing with sports, airborne skills and reserves. In his new job he had discovered military red-tape, a certain lack of direct responsibility, and the difficulty of taking initiatives and risks. All these things he could not have imagined when he had chosen to join the all-draftee, 1st RCP (Regiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes), the most ancient French parachute regiment which was established in Morocco in 1943 with the help of Americans. Happily, he had just found the confidential files and reports that were to allow every unit of the 11th Airborne Division to train and prepare for any intervention in Africa. In big boxes, that his current chief used to dig out of the only office safe, he had conscientiously made contact with some accurate political, military and logistic information. At last, he understood the origin of the impressive knowledge of one of his previous company commanders in 1974 when, as a platoon leader, he had spent four months in Gabon under the defense agreements signed at the beginning of the 60's.

The autumn of 1977 was progressing in this charming south-western region of France with hunting and military exercises in the beautiful red and yellow forested hills, and, of course, with all kinds of festivities after the corn cropping and grape harvesting. So, he hardly noticed that, at the end of October, the three all-volunteer airborne

regiments had been put on alert. His thoughts were focused on the company commander course he would attend at the infantry school in Montpellier the following spring and, obviously, on A Company which would be the future arena where he would prove all his capacities and his leadership skills as soon as he took command at the beginning of August.

One day he became aware that the political situation in Mauritania was worsening, but he did not regard this information more important than any other bizarre news which from time to time used to come from Africa, the "across-the-Mediterranean-Sea-continent". He remembered all the "Guepard" warning and readiness exercises he had undertaken during these five years, and the fifteen-day delay imposed on the departure to Gabon by a military coup in Niger. Through his Spanish readings, he was aware that two years previously Spain had abandoned her two provinces of Western Sahara (109,000 square miles, 75,000 dwellers, mainly nomadic tribesmen, according to the latest Spanish statistical inquiry) contested for a long time by both Morocco and Mauritania. He knew that the POLISARIO liberation movement (Frente POular para la LIberacion de SAguia El Hamra y RIO de Oro) existed, supported by Algeria. Algeria had been dismissed from the negotiations by the Spaniards because of her previous strong opposition to the exploitation of the vast phosphate deposits in Bou Craa ...and, certainly, because of her socialist regime and the threat she might pose with a border on the Atlantic Ocean, opposite of the Canary Islands. Obviously, the Moroccans thought the POLISARIO was only created by Algeria to further her own interests, and that historic

legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some of the tribes living in Western Sahara were enough to establish Morocco's claim over these territories.

Nevertheless, P. did not think that the following events might have any implication for his future life :

* The well-organized "Green March" of 350,000 Moroccan civilians into these lands on November 6, 1975; in fact, a peaceful occupation;

* The 60/40 territorial partition between Morocco and Mauritania under the Madrid Tripartite Agreements on November 20, 1975;

* The set up of the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic on February 27, 1976 in Tindouf, Algeria.

All of a sudden, on a gorgeous November 1977 morning, his eyes were not attracted by the first snow on the Pyrenean mountains, thirty miles southward, but by a highly-protected message asking for an officer and three NCO's to go to Mauritania within three days. There was no other comment than the requested qualifications :

- to be physically fit, with all the compulsory injections for a stay in Africa --P. did know that very few in the regiment could not comply with such a demand, for knowing such personnel information was one of his daily duties;

- to have completed the forward air controller course -- P. had not managed to spend three weeks in the charming German city of Baden-Baden taking the course as had most of the regiment's lieutenants, but his certificate of achievement was "far more" valid due to the rough conditions of Le Larzac training area where he qualified two years ago;

- to be able to jump within a HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) squad -- a quick checking would show P. that he was one of the five young officers who did fit this last condition.

Less than thirty minutes later, he was in the colonel's office with the list of all the officers and NCO's who could be sent without any turmoil for the regiment, their family, or their career (there were so many exams they could not afford to miss, even for an actual mission !). By "chance" the first name on the list was his, and he could not imagine that the colonel might select another officer to lead the team. The "Old Man" had a different opinion, chose an older captain and managed to give good reasons which were neither thoroughly nor fairly accepted by P., but triggered anger, and a determination to enhance the limited knowledge P. had over the pros and cons of the conflict in this part of Africa.

"The best, first gone" became a postulate he could not hear without a feeling of frustration. However, from this day forward, he began reading all the information he could gather on Mauritania, cutting articles from newspapers and reviews, and so he managed to produce a very useful survey about this country, twice as big as France, but with only 2 million inhabitants. He also realized that the defense agreements between Nouakchott and Paris had been abrogated since 1973; but he was not a lawyer and knew the versatility and many-sidedness of French foreign policy towards Chad at this same moment ! Besides, his spirits were already in the desert he had been introduced to by some books he had read more than fifteen years earlier (especially "L'Homme a l'étoile d'argent" and "L'Escadron blanc") which told the story of French colonization of

Northern Africa, the combats and alliances with warrior tribes, the retrieval of dromedary herds, the fight against thirst and heat, the religious beauty of the nights at odds with the daily roughness of the landscape.

But for the time being, he had to forget all romantic ideas, help to set up the first team without resentment --and it was not so easy-- and hope that other teams would be sent in the near future. In fact, several regiments of the division had been ordered to prepare such human assets and both their mission and location were beginning to leak out among some initiated officers. He was happy to belong to this number and to learn that the regiment's team was stationed inside the SOMIMA (SOciete MIniere de MAuritanie) plant of Akjoujt, where thousands tons of copper concentrate were produced, representing more than 6 percent of Mauritania's national export, thus a major objective for a liberation front movement seeking to cripple the economy and incite internal opposition.

At the beginning of December 1977, things appeared to worsen when the newspapers carried information about the constant raids of POLISARIO against the 400-mile, one-track mineral railway linking the port at Nouadhibou with the iron ore mines of Zouerate. The first attack on this city by guerrillas the past May had killed two French technicians. The guerrillas had abducted another six ("considered mercenaries reinforcing the potential of Mauritania"), hastening the evacuation of 450 dependents, the arrival of Moroccan troops and the collapse of production. After a small, but psychologically well-focused mortar shelling on the capital (3 wounded), the rebels had launched a second attack in July, and on October 25 captured two more French civilians. Now, the French government became deeply involved in order to retrieve the eight hostages, the more so

as the French Communist Party's leader, Mr. Marchais, had undertaken negotiations with the Algerian government, and a German commando raid had succeeded in freeing a tourist plane hijacked in Somalia, more than one month earlier.

Then, on December 19, the regiment learned that, two days previously, French warplanes had destroyed a great number of POLISARIO vehicles that had taken part in attacks on the railway (in fact, the aircraft had struck three times on December 12, 13 and 18), and that the division had to ~~send~~ more teams. This time the "Old man" should not be able to give P. good reasons for not dispatching him, who was ready to face the "djoundi" (soldiers) !

Obviously, he was selected without any problem, but before his departure he would know that the eight French hostages had been released, on December 22, and that the French government had less reason to legitimize another action. But he never noticed that, two days later, the Organization of African Unity had been called on by Madagascar's President to condemn the "inadmissible French aggression". Neither was he informed that, the day before, Paris had eventually acknowledged that "elements of the French Air Force intervened twice". Happily, P. had Christmas with his family; the first real holiday in a long time because he had spent the last August in La Courtine training area as a liaison officer (... and there learned of the birth of his third child).

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THE MISSION

There was only a very short pause in Paris to undertake the last administrative procedures and an ultimate opportunity to look at a film before abandoning Western civilization. The air trip to Dakar was quicker than the night train travel through France, and the small regimental team did not need a long time to identify another four-man team in civvies amidst the passengers coming back to Africa after Christmas holidays. The following day, both teams were to gather and fly to Zouerate where they would constitute the most northern human asset of the French military deployment to help Mauritania; but none of them knew it at that moment.

Until the landing in Dakar, the mission was only envisaged; but neither its actual terms nor the final destination had been issued, much less the Commandant's intention. The presence of at least eight "Jaguar" fighter-bombers, some "Mirage" air-defense fighters, one C-135 tanker, many "C-160 Transall" and "Noratlas" transport and two "Atlantic" sea-patrol planes, all of them secured by commandos and dogs, gave quickly an idea of the importance of the "LAMANTIN" operation. In fact, these warplanes had arrived in Dakar on November 22, but Major General Forget and his joint headquarters had been stealthily preparing the missions, communications and procedures since November 2. Concerning the C-160 airborne command post, it was generally stationed in Nouakchott. Among the team, the comments were focused on all these air means rather than the mild temperature and the typical atmosphere of the Senegalese capital.

Some time later in uphill Ouakam camp, in a twilight environment, the situation room displayed for P. a number of data he could not have imagined and that he was not allowed to share with his subordinates :

- * The radius of action of the Algerian MIG 21 aircraft which constituted the heaviest threat for air operations and another step up in the conflict, had Algiers decided to be more involved in the war or, by "lending" some planes to Polisario or surrogate pilots, to take such kind of revenge upon its ancient motherland and her "re-colonization" behavior;
- * The Northern border beyond which the French planes might not trespass, even to secure a major Mauritanian unit; the political reason was obvious -- France did not completely support the Mauritanian claim on any portion of the former Spanish Western Sahara but had decided to retaliate to any violation of the "useful" part of Mauritanian territory;
- * The location of the ground assets in Mauritania - Akjoujt, Atar, Nouadhibou and Zouerate - along with the radio net which showed that, due to the specificity of the radio sets, the communications between the Army teams and the operation forward command post in Nouakchott passed through the Joint Operations Center in Paris;
- * The increase of the technical military assistants who were helping improve the Mauritanian Army's expansion from 5,000 to 12,000 men in such units as the school of Atar (Ecole Militaire Interarmes : E.M.I.A.) or the armored squadrons of F'derik, 15 miles West of Zouerate;
- * The assessment over Polisario's anti-aircraft missile capability; it appeared that the Soviet-made SA 7 was more dangerous for a jet-propelled aircraft, in spite of its speed

and flight altitude, than for the turbo-propelled "Atlantic" where the hottest point was located thirty yards behind the tail at the junction of the engines exhaust gas flows;

* The devastating result of 30 mm cannons and rockets on vehicles equipped with extra gas drums. The three strikes in December had not been performed with napalm and phosphorous bombs, as Polisario had claimed in order to condemn the French "barbarous" misconduct, but more than fifty Land-Rovers and trucks had exploded and burnt;

* Some hints about the time between the report of the target being acquired (6 a.m.) and the second strike authorization from Paris ("Green Bingo") at 3 p.m. on December, 13.

The "Jaguars" had already landed back in Dakar and only three hours were left before nightfall ~~for~~ intervening at a distance of more than 1,000 miles. Obviously, the political conceptions did not fit the operational requirements, and this delay revealed possible discussions and disagreements between the ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs and among President Giscard d'Estaing's advisers.

Then, a colonel explained the purpose and the mission of the parachute teams :

- first, they had to manifest France's backing, and help improve the relationship with the Mauritanian authorities who had been rather reluctant in requesting this help; in that matter, all kinds of tactical advice or suggestion would be given carefully so as to avoid any susceptibility;

- second, of course, intelligence gathering and field assessment were very important parts of the mission in a country where it had appeared that there was great discrepancy

between facts and reports. These latter were very often what people would have appreciated the truth to look like;

- third, the ground assets should be able to control air strikes in their zones, and mainly around their “garrisons”, where close air support might be necessary if friendly and enemy forces were very entangled. It was obvious that the reduced tactical mobility of the ground assets could not afford them the opportunity to achieve the same mission as the airborne control post;
- last, be able to undertake any short notice operation to secure a downed aircraft, or rescue a crew. A SA 330 “Puma” helicopter was available from time to time and its landing at the post might be related with such an operation. It would also pick up the mail at every liaison visit to the area, and send it from Dakar, so as to keep the mission discreet.

So, now P. understood that he was only a small piece in a vast military-political jigsaw-puzzle, where the Air Force would play the major role. He also understood why the Commandant was not one of the well-known Army generals who had dealt with the African affairs for decades. Even the Navy (the “Royale” as its officers liked to nickname it because of their refined manners, their passion for old traditions, and a certain self-satisfaction) had managed to be on the stage when the “specialists” would stay out of the spotlights ! But he had to acknowledge that nobody was able to find, track, and focus on an object in the desert better than “Atlantic” aircraft which could fly more than fourteen hours, and were equipped with adequate observation and magnetic means. For them, the routine hunt for Soviet submarines in the Mediterranean Sea had been replaced by a more

fascinating chase where they played as rangers. Because higher in the skies, waiting for the information provided by their Navy counterparts, the pack of four to eight "Jaguars" was ready to raise the hue and cry and strike at Polisario vehicles. In order to preserve the continuity of their action, but also due to the great distances between Dakar and the intervention area, the planes used to refuel from a C-135 [the ground assets called them "hen with chicken"], sometimes under the protection of "Mirages".

Being well aware of the general frame of the "LAMANTIN" operation, P. was also conscious that, due to the existing means, air action could only be implemented in daylight. So, it was necessary to obtain accurate information and to detect the foe far from the friendly lines. At this moment P. remembered the methods of Colonel Stirling's Long Range Desert Group during WW II in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica when attacking German or Italian remote airfields: long approaches during the night through "impracticable" terrain, camouflage and dispersion, quick concentration before a violent attack at dusk, escape at night, scattering again, then refueling and recovering in very small bases. Was not this, with modern means, the traditional "rezzou" of dromedary thieves or avenger parties in Sahara territories before the colonization ? Was not this the current method of the POLISARIO ?

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ZOUERATE

At dawn the next day, the eight paratroopers took off in a "Transall" bound for Zouerate with a stop-over in Nouakchott, where the colonel in charge of the ground assets was to board. Through the portholes, they could see the rough rocky plateaus cut apart by deep canyons, the variety of red, yellow and brown colors and the seeming absence of life. The capital, close to the seashore, looked like a cluster of white cubes surrounded by litter. The modern city was too tiny to shelter the thousands of shepherds and small farmers blown away from the Northern and Eastern zones by war and drought who, now gathered in shanties. Then, During the second leg of the trip P. could not take any more advantage of the landscape. In spite of the noise, the colonel used the time to give him the last instructions and recommendations.

Zouerate, the capital city of the Tigris province, was also the seat of the 5th Military Region, the commander of which was a lieutenant-colonel with some troops in a very bad condition of training, morale, equipment, and efficiency. The local Mauritanian "spearhead force" was constituted by the armored squadrons of F'Derik with brand-new French A.M.L. (wheeled vehicles equipped with either a 90 mm gun or a 60 mm mortar), but unskilled crews and poor leadership. A very efficient French major and four NCO's were striving to encourage the leaders to control their men, the mechanics to look after their vehicles and the crews to use their weapons in the right way. As far as the other Mauritanian forces were concerned, some isolated platoons were garrisoned near the small railway technical posts of Bou-Lanouar, Tichla, Tmeimichat, Choum and Touagil.

But none of them had any deep nationalist motivation to oppose fiercely the POLISARIO, which for some could appear as friends from neighboring northern tribes (especially the famous warriors Reguibat). The Black soldiers from the South thought this war was only a follow-up of domestic rivalries amidst Maure slave masters (the "Men in Blue", after their wide djellaba), with whom they did not want to deal. Slavery was only "officially" suppressed in 1980.

Happily for the security of the iron ore mine, but complicating the situation as a whole, two Moroccan infantry battalions were deployed around the city; the 1st B.I.P. (Airborne) and the 4th B.I.M. (Motorized). Two more battalions secured the most western part of the railway and Nouadhibou. It has to be said that Moroccan troops might appear at this time as Paris's surrogates. During the spring of 1977, with the help of French airplanes and weapons supply, King Hassan II had dispatched units to Zaire's Shaba province to help quell a tribal rebellion, certainly backed by Marxist African regimes. It was obvious that France wanted the African continent to fix its problems without the involvement of the two Super-Powers, and wanted her friends to back their interests with her discreet support. Opposition to the Soviet/Marxist threat - or at least its containment to the countries already helped by Cubans, East-Europeans or North-Koreans - was also part of her strategy. Nevertheless, France seemed not so supportive of the Moroccan policy toward Western Sahara, even though she did not want to trigger off any destabilization of the region.

From the plane, the parachutists could see the Moroccan positions and dug-outs, built with mine excavators, as well as the wide dry moat and bulwark surrounding the

city. Equipped with anti-tank rocket launchers not yet in service with the French Army, the Moroccan soldiers were occupying this line and exemplified the same obstinacy and earnestness as had their ancestors in WW I trenches, 60 years earlier. Every morning on the back road, a truck stopped every 200 feet to supply water and food, but happily a brand-new airstrip already allowed regular rotation of these units to Morocco.

The city was a small modern one built by the S.N.I.M. (Societe Nationale des Industries Minieres) Company on the Northern side of Kediat Idjil, the iron ore mountain towering at more than 1,200 feet over the mainly flat desert. In the eastern part, were located the earthen houses of the Arab village. On the western side a cool oasis of date palm-trees stretched out its tiny parcels of vegetable and cereal cultivation, its wells and irrigation trenches. The North of the city was full of shanties made with opened-barrel steel sheet, cardboard, plastic bags and wooden planks - all the residues of this offspring of western civilization in Africa!

The first steps on the airstrip brought a surprise for P., one of his Mauritanian schoolmates in the officer infantry basic course was departing after a quick visit to Zouerate. It was a real pleasure to feel such a warm welcome and to exchange rapidly some impressions and remembrances. Some days later, the reality appeared less attractive when P. was warned that certainly his comrade had been gathering information for the POLISARIO, and was holding a higher position in that organization than his current rank of captain in the Mauritanian Army. Obviously this mission would be different from the classic operations the Airborne Division, as a whole, was training for !

The second welcome was given by the Moroccan colonel commanding the 1st B.I.P., who was accommodated in his perfect concrete, air-conditioned command post under a volley-ball court near the airfield tower. Some old NCOs, who had begun their careers in the French Army, were happy to chat with the new team. All the newcomers quickly became aware of some details of the relationship between Moroccans and Mauritians, who did not speak the same Arabic and had decided to communicate in French. A similar community of culture was found again, some moment later, in the 5th Region command post, where “Divan” (code name of this Mauritanian lieutenant-colonel) presented the situation and, above all, recounted the marvelous years he had spent in Paris universities. There was no more time to think of the Seine riversides, only time to cross the dusty city, dodge some wandering goats, and enable the former team to leave with the French colonel after a change of command and information on the “post”.

Located in the most southern part of the city, not far from the railway, the “post” had been in fact the mortuary of the former hospital, then destroyed, and was later a firefighters’ club lent to the French Army. A one-tier building including two wide rooms, a cubicle (for the team leader), a restroom and a porch, it was surrounded by a one-acre surface with a “civilian” fence and overlooked by a small Moroccan post (maybe, the last refuge in case of emergency ?). It was large enough for eight men to live in Spartan conditions, allowed the landing of one “Puma”, and needed enough security improvements to forestall laziness. There was no cooking; the meals were bought at high cost at the mine restaurant and brought back by the daily patrol so everyone might focus on the mission.

But for the time being, the whole team stared at the Kediat Idjil and the closer ridge, Guelb-ech-Chibani (the Old Man's Hill), and meditated over the future, the threats, the purpose of the mission and the personalities of the other members.

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WAITING

Above all, the team's members needed to know each other because, obviously, each possessed his own culture, behavior and pre-departure guidelines. The other four parachutists came from the famous 13th Dragoons, the strategic long range reconnaissance independent regiment which did not belonged to the 11th Airborne Division. Trained to survive on caches, to gather intelligence on a possible Soviet invasion in Central Europe, they might show some contempt for their Infantry counterparts. Their present task was only to provide the team with the best communications thanks to a "luggage-radio", a modernized version of the one used by the French secret service just before WW II. Each NCO featured a good temper, and the ambiance within the team fit the toughest camaraderie criteria very quickly.

Of course, the team's protection and rapid emergency reaction were P.'s first concerns, and all the members tried to solve the different problems they faced. A small electric transformer became a stronghold tower due to the iron sheets and sandbags pulled up around it. Empty barrels were set up into two rows, then filled with sand to protect the door and the main windows from a direct hit and to allow retaliation fire. Huge tires from the iron mine "dumper" trucks fixed some weaknesses in the fence, and even the ancient and empty cistern of the hospital was envisaged as the last refuge. At last, the gate looked like a true post entrance with some blockade capacities. Inside the building, the individual weapons were given precise locations, hand-grenades were aligned on a small wooden board for quick disposal, and each one maintained ready a rucksack with ammunition,

small equipment and two water canteens. One dragoon was permanently assigned to listen to the radio traffic, and an infantryman to take care of the compound while the others were implementing their particular mission of the day, inside or outside the city.

Every four days, each infantryman, including P., mounted guard during a whole night. He was accompanied by one firefighter's dog which had not wanted to leave its playing area when its master had been evacuated after the last POLISARIO attack. Its presence was very reassuring and many times helped the paratroopers avoid mistakes, because donkeys are very stubborn animals which are not used to answering sentry's warnings and challenges ! Between rounds, these guard-nights helped improve the general knowledge of the region. Everyone read the various books about Mauritania the Catholic priest of Zouerate had gathered for years and lent very generously. Through a book designed in 1926 for the French officers and NCOs serving with the North-African regiments, P. began studying Arabic, some words of which were very useful. During his sojourn, they helped him give evidence of his respect for different cultures and religions. They allowed him also to bargain for sand to protect the post, what the Mauritanians considered good and rich "earth" for gardens !

All these measures, in addition to regular jogging and a good physical fitness, were very efficient in improving cohesiveness and maintaining a high morale. Furthermore, the team tried to show to both Mauritanians and Moroccans that something had changed and that this team was to stay for a long time. On the other hand, such measures triggered a need for perfect defense and protection, and the NCOs insistently asked for a machine-gun. After long bargaining, P. managed to obtain one from the

colonel who did not believe it was of any use for this kind of mission. But he certainly underestimated its psychological and moral value amidst isolated personnel !

In fact, to avoid any feeling of encirclement, it was quickly decided to get out of the post and the city and to get to know the surrounding terrain where, some time ago, French technicians used to look for arrowheads and other artifacts from the Stone Age, when the desert was still a forest or a jungle. The paratroopers had to find vehicle tracks and indicia of recent movements by POLISARIO, and contact the various forward posts manned by Mauritanians. So, many times a week, they drove their Spanish "Santana" reconnaissance vehicle on the roads and paths through the mountain or the dry moat and bulwark toward the desert. Of course, the first time they crossed the check point controlled by a Mauritanian armored vehicle, they experienced an odd feeling at hearing "No more friends ahead, sir". But by daylight, since they had a very efficient radio set to alert French planes, the only danger stemmed from an itinerary mistake. They would have liked to have a GPS (Global Positioning System) device to skip the fastidious tasks of setting up cairns and carefully verifying every compass bearing or detail on the ground and on the gross maps. After a very uncomfortable experience in rough terrain, when they had needed one hour to clear the track for their vehicle, they acted carefully and were happy that neither heat nor sand winds were customary in this period of year.

These patrols led the paratroopers to the east to the remains of the Lieutenant's tomb (in remembrance of a French officer killed in 1911), to the north to the Guelb-el-Ghein (a weird, black hill isolated on the flat, brown, red and yellow desert) and to the west to the garrison of F'Derik. But the south featured the most interesting results with a

wide depression which represented a perfect avenue of approach. Between two smooth rocky slopes a flat and hard surface allowed speeds higher than 50 miles and showed important traffic, the tracks of which had not been swept away by powerful siroccos.

It was obvious that something was occurring in the area, but the paratroopers were not allowed to stay in a cache for some days and execute an operation; they had to wait for the POLISARIO to start something. Their waiting did not last long. The small Mauritanian garrison of Choum was attacked at dusk on January 11th. Nevertheless, they could do nothing but listen to the colonel who came two days later for an inquiry and summarized: "The POLISARIO vehicles dashed in when the whole platoon was preparing dinner and did not notice the warnings from the forward outpost. In the first minutes the platoon leader was mortally wounded. Abandoning vehicles, radio sets and some weapons, his men ran away to the desert and all were fortunately retrieved the day after. The enemy could not destroy all the buildings with recoilless rifle fire because an old "moghzni" (a kind of police auxiliary) gallantly defended his quartermaster stock with his WW II rifle!"

Some days later, at dusk, a warning was quickly given to all the troops in Zouerate that more than 100 POLISARIO vehicles were rushing toward the city. No help could be expected from the French warplanes still in Dakar, and the only small "push-pull" reconnaissance aircraft of the Mauritanian Air Force was rather useless in such a situation. At the post, the defense procedures were quickly implemented, but even the paratroopers' professionalism could not suppress some excitement. Were they "seeing the elephant" this night? In fact, the vehicles belonged to the regular forces, but no

coordination had been achieved and “Divan”, the region commander, did not know that an operation had been undertaken in his area of responsibility !

After both experiences, the paratroopers became more aware of the specificity of this war and trusted the official reports less about the “ferocious defense up to close contact” or the “command and control organization” (which, in fact, was the exact reverse of the domestic social and political struggles). Nevertheless, the mission went on, it was not time to focus on one’s own feelings.

In fact, the following operation - nicknamed “Great Capitalism” by the team - was another surprise for the paratroopers. At the end of January, without any previous warning, a hundred light vehicles, both Moroccan and Mauritanian, crossed the “fortification” and headed to the Guelb-el-Ghein. Making two great upside-down Vs, they provided an escort to several cars full of white civilians. The reason of such a force deployment was quickly guessed when words like “Bethlehem Steel” popped up in the conversations. In fact, the Guelb-el-Ghein was composed of a highly concentrated iron ore, and would be exploited when the country was in peace. It was thoroughly erased at the beginning of the 90s.

And so life went on, filled with night guard duty, physical training activities, contacts and movements in the vicinity, radio reports, and thankfully helicopter landings which brought some news from the outside world. When, as scheduled, P. had to leave to attend the company commanders’ course, he had never rescued a crew nor taken part in any combat or close air support operation. He knew now that war might look like the frustrating waiting so well described by Dino Buzzati in “The Tartarian Desert”. But

during the following years, he was reminded of the small lessons he had learned during these weeks, and tried to never forget the men and the country he had known in such circumstances.

Among these impressions, important at every level of leadership, were intelligence preparation, team training, flexibility, supply, security and a pre-determined end-state for achieving strategic, political objectives. A well planned intervention may stabilize areas of concern and prevent large scale wars, but "come as you are" deployments of small forces are risky at best, even with very versatile troops.

In May 1978, believing that all the French warplanes were committed to operations in Chad and Zaire, the POLISARIO Front tried to attack Zouerate. His vehicles were stopped by Mauritanian troops, and about fifty of them were destroyed by the last interventions of "Jaguars" in this war. In July, a military coup ousted the Mauritanian president and the post in Zouerate was closed. In October, a cease-fire was signed by Nouakchott and the POLISARIO Front...and the war went on between the POLISARIO and the Kingdom of Morocco ("but this is another story !").

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CONCLUSION

The facts reported in this document might appear too old and too low-level to be of any importance to foreign officers, especially after all the experiences accumulated by the U.S. military during the last years in the Former-YUGOSLAVIA, SOMALIA, SAUDI ARABIA, and RWANDA.

The author does not concur with this opinion because, through decades of studying Greek, Roman, and European histories he has come to understand the importance of past experience and culture. Thus, as the commanding officer of a French infantry regiment, he has taken advantage of the lessons learned fifteen years earlier in ZOUERATE. He managed to give some useful pieces of advice to the four officers he sent to MINURSO (United Nations Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara) ... to check a possible referendum, the principle of which was decided in 1966 by the United Nations Organization. Furthermore, his Mauritanian experience certainly determined the follow-up of his career and his study of international affairs and foreign languages. Finally, the casual discovery of the article "Army Special Operations Forces in the Current and Future Security Environments" (SPECIAL WARFARE, May 1996, p.8-15) convinced the author that the French Army's knowledge of, and behavior in, low-intensity conflicts were still valuable for strategic leaders.